



## Venezuela

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and a population of 27 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic, and the remaining 8 percent Protestant, a member of another religion, or atheist. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimates that evangelical Protestants constitute 10 percent of the population.

There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 is concentrated among persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area. The Jewish community numbers approximately 13,000 and is mainly concentrated in Caracas.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is mandated to maintain a registry of religious groups, disburse funds to religious organizations, and promote awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, with the additional provision that groups serve the community's social interests. There were no accounts of the Government refusing to register religious groups during the period covered by this report.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the Government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. The Government continued to

provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor, although the subsidies were reduced in some states. The Government continued to fund the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) at reduced levels. Other religious groups are free to establish their own schools. There were reports of government funding for certain evangelical groups, although much of this was related to social projects implemented via the Government's social programs.

The Government observes Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Christmas as national holidays.

Foreign missionaries require special visas. Missionaries expressed concern about refusal rates for first-time religious visas and, less frequently, renewals. Some missionary groups also complained that the religious visa process was prone to delays.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. The Constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or interfere with the rights of others; however, there were efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of the Catholic Church and missionary groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas. Since the December 2006 reelection of President Chavez, leaders from a number of religious groups noted that the Government was less open to dialogue.

The Government continued to prohibit foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas. In 2005 the Ministry of Interior rescinded permission for the New Tribes Mission (NTM) to conduct its social programs among indigenous tribes; NTM appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report. The NTM withdrew more than one hundred missionaries from indigenous areas in compliance with the Government's order. Foreign missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) did not return to the country during the period covered by this report. In 2005 the Mormons withdrew 219 missionaries, citing difficulties in receiving religious visas. Some missionaries working with indigenous peoples were expelled from those areas, while the others departed voluntarily.

President Chavez on multiple occasions publicly criticized specific Catholic bishops and the Papal Nuncio, including during his January 11, 2008 address to the National Assembly and the July 18, 2007 swearing-in ceremony for his Defense Minister. He specifically warned Catholic bishops to refrain from criticizing the Government's proposal to reform the 1999 Constitution, which failed in a December 2, 2007 public referendum, as well as other public policy issues. Prior to the referendum, the CEV issued communiqués critical of elements of the proposed reform and urging political tolerance and reconciliation.

In its March 2008 *Contemporary Global Anti-Semitism* report, the U.S. Department of State listed the country as a state sponsor of anti-Semitism because of statements by the President, other government officials, and government-affiliated media outlets that the Anti-Defamation League also characterized as anti-Semitic. Government-sponsored media outlets utilized anti-Jewish caricatures and political cartoons on several occasions. The local Jewish community expressed strong concerns that such statements and publications fostered a climate permissive of anti-Semitic actions, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust of the community. The hosts of *La Hojilla*, a pro-Chavez talk show on official government television, made recurring anti-Semitic slurs, and the Government's de facto official daily newspaper, *Vea*, regularly published anti-Semitic comments. Without offering any evidence, these media outlets accused rabbis and businesspersons of conspiring to destabilize the Government and of funding demonstrations against the Government's proposed changes to the 1999 Constitution.

On December 2, 2007, the day of the public referendum to reform the 1999 Constitution, members of the police intelligence unit (DISIP) searched a Jewish community center in Caracas for weapons. The police, who had a search warrant, found nothing and left. On December 4, 2007, representatives of the Jewish community issued a communiqué calling the raid unjustifiable.

Jewish leaders also expressed concern over the Government's close relationship with Iran, whose President called repeatedly for the annihilation of the country of Israel and repeatedly denied the existence of the Holocaust. The Jewish community also expressed concern about the presence of Hezbollah members in the

country.

The military chaplain corps consisted almost exclusively of Catholic priests. Although armed forces members of other religious groups were allowed to attend services of their faith, they did not enjoy the same access to clergy. During 2008 authorities tightly regulated and limited access of evangelical chaplains to prisons.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Jewish leaders reported incidents of anti-Semitism including graffiti, slurs, political cartoons, and media commentary. Incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti in Caracas during the reporting period included: on June 30, 2008, at the Club Hebraica; on April 4, 2008, at the private Metropolitan University; on February 27, 2008, at the de Mariperez synagogue; on January 20, 2008, on Jewish homes in the San Bernardino neighborhood; and on November 29, 2007, across from a Jewish senior citizens' residence, also in San Bernardino.

On February 27, 2008, members of a small progovernment party forcibly occupied the archbishop's residence in central Caracas for a short time. The group held a press conference on the premises in which they denounced Catholic Church leaders and the Papal Nuncio. President Chavez publicly blamed the take-over on infiltrators trying to discredit his Government. By the end of the reporting period, no arrests were reported.

On February 14, 2008, a group calling itself the "We Will Prevail Group of the United Central Left" detonated a small explosive device and painted graffiti at the entrance of the Holy See Mission in Caracas. By the end of the reporting period, no arrests were reported.

The Catholic Church denounced the Reform Catholic Venezuelan Church for usurping its rites. The Reform Catholic Venezuelan Church reportedly describes itself in Bolivarian terms. A Catholic archbishop alleged that the Government funded the new church in order to create a schism.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In late June 2008 the U.S. Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited the country and met with Jewish community leaders as well as government officials to raise deep concern about the prevalence of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Embassy maintained close contact with various religious communities. The U.S. Ambassador met regularly with religious authorities and when appropriate sought to raise their concerns with government officials; however, embassy representatives had only limited access to government officials.

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